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ABSTRACT

While it might appear to be a harmless rite of passage, bullying can have deadly consequences for some school children. Reports from Norway, England, and Japan indicate that children have allegedly committed suicide following episodes of severe bullying. Researchers agree that bullying is worldwide in scope and negatively impacts the general school culture and students' right to attend safe schools free of fear. There seems to be a lack of bullying among Pacific Island children, perhaps because it is a group experience (friends coming to the aid of a victim). In Micronesia and Polynesia, traditional child-rearing is usually indulgent, protective, and supportive, with collective and shared authority over children, values that might positively influence later behavior. Studies indicate a strong correlation between bullying other students during school years and criminal behavior in adulthood. Bullying seems to increase during elementary years, peak during junior high school years, and decline during high school years. An intervention approach includes distributing an initial questionnaire to student and adults, increasing personal awareness, establishing class rules, and incorporating other components of anti-bullying programs. There is still a great need for schools to be vigilant of bullying behavior and take preventive action. (RT)

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Bullying in Schools Should Not Be Par for the Course

By Stan Koki*

While it might appear to be a harmless rite of passage, bullying can have deadly consequences for some school children. Reports from Norway, England, and Japan indicate that children have allegedly committed suicide following episodes of severe bullying (Rigby, 1997). *USA Today* recently concluded that "bullying is rampant in U.S. schools," and *The Honolulu Advertiser* stated that there is cause for alarm ("Study Sounds Alarm," 1999).

"Despite years of self-esteem lessons, mediation classes, and circle time, bullying continues to be a pervasive and destructive force in the school lives of our adolescent children," writes Amy Dickinson in *Time* (August 30, 1999). "Some 80% of middle schoolers reported engaging in bullying behavior—ranging from excessive taunting and rumor spreading to destruction of property and physical aggression—according to a study published this month in the *Journal of Early Adolescence*. A high percentage of students who bully others also report being victims themselves. Bullying is worst in the middle school years, as kids make transitions to new schools, and peaks during the first few months of school, when students vie for power among their peers," Dickinson states in her article, entitled "Bully Pulpit."

Recent work in Australia sheds further light on the serious consequences of bullying among youngsters. In three studies undertaken by Rigby and Slee in South Australia between 1993-1996, self-reports from adolescent school children about suicidal thoughts and attempts to harm themselves were found to be significantly associated with reports of being bullied by peers. Evidence is mounting, with the growing number of children committing suicide after a history of peer victimization, leaving little doubt that "severe bullying for some children can be devastating" (Rigby, 1997).

There is growing consensus among researchers that bullying in schools "is a worldwide problem" that can negatively impact the general school climate and students' right to attend safe schools free of fear (Banks, 1997). But what exactly is bullying?

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Bullying Defined

Bullying refers to repeated oppression, either physical or psychological, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group. The essential ingredient is a power imbalance that makes possible the ill treatment of the victim (Rigby, 1997). In studies of bullying, the most commonly reported form was verbal abuse and harassment, followed by nasty comments about physical appearance, and social bullying. Social bullying, a more subtle form of isolation resulting from the exclusion of children from peer friendship groups, was found to be perhaps "the most pernicious" (Gibson, 1998).

Researchers point out that bullying consists of direct behaviors—such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing—carried out by one or more students against a victim. In addition to direct attacks, bullying can also be indirect—for example, socially isolating a student through intentional exclusion. Whether direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is that physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time, creating an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Banks, 1997; Batsche & Knoff, 1994).

Bullying in Pacific Societies

The practice of bullying as defined in this paper is perceived by some Pacific educators as being essentially "a Western problem" (C. Filibert, personal e-mail communication, August 25, 1999). When it does occur, it tends to be a group experience. For example, if a student is teased or oppressed by another, that student's friends will come to his or her rescue. "Comraderie is very important in the islands and doing things together in a group is more of the ideal than individualism. A big person who exerts his power over a smaller person is frowned upon" (C. Filibert, personal e-mail communication, August 25, 1999). In this situation, if bullying occurs in schools, "adults are quick to notice and take corrective actions so that it never lasts" (S. Pierantozzi, personal e-mail communication, August 28, 1999). "To bully means you're totally out of place" (E. Joseph, personal e-mail communication, August 30, 1999).

Lack of bullying behavior among children in the Pacific region could result from the fact that Pacific Island cultures reserve "a special place in relation to child treatment. Traditional child-rearing in Micronesia and Polynesia is usually indulgent, protective, and supportive," with collective and shared authority over children (Rubinstein, 1994).

Serious Consequences

While bullying is not prevalent in many parts of the Pacific region, studies in Scandinavian countries and elsewhere revealed that a strong correlation exists between bullying other students during school years and criminal behavior as adults. Olweus's study (1993) indicated that 60 percent of students who were characterized as bullies in grades 6–9 ran up at least one criminal conviction by age 24. Another study pointed out that chronic bullies seem to maintain their negative behaviors into their adult years, greatly lessening their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships as adults (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994).

Bullying frequently causes the victims to become fearful of school and to view it as an unsafe and unhappy place. It is estimated that up to 7 percent of U.S. eighth graders stay home at least once a month because of bullies. Being bullied can lead to depression and low self-esteem, problems that can carry into adulthood (Olweus, 1993; Batsche & Knoff, 1994).

Various reports and studies have established that approximately 15 percent of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behavior. Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary years and reach a peak during the junior high years, declining during the high school years. Boys engage in bullying behavior more frequently than girls (Olweus, 1993).

Intervention Programs

In countries where bullying is a pervasive problem, schools are beginning to address bullying through intervention programs. Olweus (1993) suggested an approach that involves interventions at the school, class, and individual levels. The approach includes the following steps:

- *Distribute an initial questionnaire to students and adults.* The questionnaire contributes to awareness of the problem's extent, helps to justify intervention efforts, and serves as a benchmark to measure the impact of improvements in school climate once other intervention components are in place.

- *Increase parental awareness.* A parental awareness campaign can be conducted during parent-teacher conference days, through parent newsletters, at PTA meetings, and in conjunction with other events that bring parents together at the school. The goal is to increase parental awareness of bullying, and encourage parental support of program goals in order to achieve program success.

- *Establish class rules.* Teachers can work with students at the class level to develop rules against bullying. Many programs seek to engage students in a series of role-playing activities and related assignments that teach alternative methods of interaction to those students who are directly involved in bullying.

- *Incorporate other components of anti-bullying programs.* These could include individualized interventions with the bullies and victims, the use of cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation, and the increase in adult supervision at key times when the behavior tends to occur (such as during recess or lunch).

Schools implementing Olweus's program have reported a 50 percent reduction in bullying (Banks, 1997).

Get the Message Out

The message in schools and communities must be crystal clear: **No Bullying Allowed!** Margaret Gunter's Ph.D. work involved surveying victims of bullying between the ages of 17 through 56 years in New South Wales, and comparing them with people from the same group who had no history of being bullied. Her work has convinced her that schools must be far more vigilant in identifying and punishing bullies. "We just can't keep on condoning criminal activity within the school group when it's not condoned outside the school ground," she reports. "Things like assault, libel, threatening behavior—they're not acceptable behavior in society. There are criminal penalties for them. But inside the grounds it's accepted by many people" (Gibson, 1998).

Associate Professor Michael Carr-Greg, the head of the education and training unit at the Center for Adolescent Health, agrees. He believes that there is great need for school intervention programs and increased community awareness. "Our society is one in which we glorify the strong and ridicule the weak, and I think that kids tend to very much take this on. In order to get these policies to work, you must involve the whole community" (Gibson, 1998).

Conclusion

Bullying is not a developmental phase of growing up—it is a serious social problem that can greatly affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially. Because it can have negative lifelong consequences for both victims and perpetrators, it is necessary for schools and communities to develop interventions that specifically address the problem of bullying.

Recommendations

1. When bullying is taking place at school, students, parents, community members, and school staff must collaborate to develop a comprehensive intervention plan that will ensure a safe school environment that is free of fear for all students.

2. Opportunities for staff development that reduces bullying on the school campus must be provided to the school staff. Teachers must be concerned with helping the bully change his or her behavior. In addition, teachers need to know how to help victims develop social habits that will prevent them from becoming repeated targets of bullying.

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